

## When Farmers Voted Red: the Gospel of Socialism in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1910-1924

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*When Farmers Voted Red: The Gospel of Socialism in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1910-1924*, by Garin Burbank. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1976. pp. 224. Maps, tables, essay on sources, index.

In the years immediately following statehood, the diverse collection of people who settled in Oklahoma experienced much soul-searching and experimentation in seeking to determine their identity. What was to be the character of this state populated by pilgrims looking for stability and prosperity? The meteoric success and ultimate failure of the Socialist party in the Sooner state was a reflection of this elusive and amorphous identity. *When Farmers Voted Red* reveals how the Socialist effort fared in rural Oklahoma. Garin Burbank examines the effect of several facets of the developing rural character upon the strength of the party. Religion, race, class, and patriotism all had disruptive effects on both the Socialist Party and Oklahoman society. Debate about socialist doctrine became submerged in the mire of personal interests and prejudices displayed by agrarians who more often chose the "belly route" instead of the "head route." (p. 186) The incompatibility of personal belief and the "true" socialist line led to the decline of the party as a viable political force by the mid-1920s. Volatile issues such as American involvement in the world war and the activities of the Ku Klux Klan created internal conflict in farmers. The forces of brotherhood through socialism dissolved when confronted with and infiltrated by the ever-hardening facets of what was to become the stereotype of the rural Oklahoman character.

Burbank's discussion of the issues in the state during the formative years is provocative and exhaustive. He supplies numerous examples, mostly gleaned from contemporary newspapers, of rural reaction to socialist activity. He follows the leaders of the party in the state through their exasperating struggles to convert non-believers and affirm the faith of party members subjected to pressures from the community. Burbank places Oklahoma in the context of the national struggle of the Socialist Party, and he presents a perceptive description of rural Oklahoman society. His extensive use of quotations and "scholarly" jargon make comprehension difficult at times, but his conclusions and observations are worth the effort. He combines an intensive analysis of socialism in Oklahoma with an effective description of the development of agrarian identity. *When Farmers Voted Red* will be welcomed by students of American agricultural, social, and political history. This book should provide an example and an inspiration for additional scholarly treatment of a dynamic era in the history of the Great Plains and the nation.

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